

Stories by English Authors: Italy

By

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A Faithful Retainer

By James Payn

When I lived in the country,—which was a long time ago,—our nearest neighbours were the Luscombes. They were very great personages in the country indeed, and the family were greatly "respected"; though not, so far as I could discern, for any particular reason, except from their having been there for several generations. People are supposed to improve, like wine, from keeping—even if they are rather "ordinary" at starting; and the Luscombes, at the time I knew them, were considered quite a "vintage" family. They had begun in Charles II.'s time, and dated their descent from greatness in the female line. That they had managed to keep a great estate not very much impaired so long was certainly a proof of great cleverness, since there had been many spend-thrifts among them; but fortunately there had been a miser or two, who had restored the average, and their fortunes.

Mr. Roger Luscombe, the present proprietor, was neither the one nor the other, but he was inclined to frugality, and no wonder; a burnt child dreads the fire, even though he may have had nothing to do with lighting it himself, and his father had kicked down a good many thousands with the help of "the bones" (as dice were called in his day) and "the devil's books" (which was the name for cards with those that disapproved of them) and race-horses; there was plenty left, but it made the old gentleman careful and especially solicitous to keep it. There was no stint, however, of any kind at the Court, which to me, who lived in the little vicarage of Dalton with my father, seemed a palace.

It was indeed a very fine place, with statues in the hall and pictures in the gallery and peacocks on the terrace. Lady Jane, the daughter of a wealthy peer, who had almost put things on their old footing with her ample dowry, was a very great lady, and had been used, I was told, to an even more splendid home; but to me, who had no mother, she was simply the kindest and most gracious woman I had ever known.

My connection with the Luscombes arose from their only son Richard being my father's pupil. We were both brought up at home, but for very different reasons. In my case it was from economy: the living was small and our family was large, though, as it happened, I had no brothers. Richard was too precious to his parents to be trusted to the tender mercies of a public school. He was in delicate health, not so much natural to him as caused by an excess of care—coddling. Though he and I were very good friends, unless when we were quarreling, it must be owned that he was a spoiled boy.

There is a good deal of nonsense talked of young gentlemen who are brought up from their cradles in an atmosphere of flattery *not* being spoiled; but unless they are angels—which is a very exceptional case—it cannot be otherwise. Richard

Luscombe was a good fellow in many ways; liberal with his money (indeed, apt to be lavish), and kind-hearted, but self-willed, effeminate, and impulsive. He had also—which was a source of great alarm and grief to his father—a marked taste for speculation.

After the age of "alley tors and commonneys," of albert-rock and hard-bake, in which we both gambled frightfully, I could afford him no opportunities of gratifying this passion; but if he could get a little money "on" anything, there was nothing that pleased him better—not that he cared for the money, but for the delight of winning it. The next moment he would give it away to a beggar. Numbers of good people look upon gambling with even greater horror than it deserves, because they cannot understand this; the attraction of risk, and the wild joy of "pulling off" something when the chances are against one, are unknown to them. It is the same with the love of liquor. Richard Luscombe had not a spark of that (his father left him one of the best cellars in England, but he never touches even a glass of claret after dinner; "I should as soon think," he says, "of eating when I am not hungry"); but he dearly liked what he called a "spec." Never shall I forget the first time he realised anything that could be termed a stake.

When he was about sixteen, he and I had driven over to some little country races a few miles away from Dalton, without, I fear, announcing our intention of so doing. Fresh air was good for "our dear Richard," and since pedestrian exercise (which he also hated) exhausted him, he had a groom and dog-cart always at his own disposal. It was a day of great excitement for me, who had never before seen a race-course. The flags, the grand stand (a rude erection of planks, which came down, by-the-bye, the next year during the race for the cup, and reduced the sporting population), the insinuating gipsies, the bawling card-sellers, and especially the shining horses with their twisted manes, all excited my admiration.

I was well acquainted with them in fiction; and these illustrations of the books I loved so well delighted me. Richard, who had read less and seen more, was bent on business.

He was tall for his age, but very slight and youthful-looking, and the contrast of his appearance with that of the company in the little ring, composed as it was of a choice selection of the roughest blackguards in England, was very striking.

Many of these knew who he was, and were very glad to see him, but only one of the book-makers secured his patronage. The fact was, Master Richard had but one five-pound note to lay; he had been saving up his pocket-money for weeks for this very purpose, and he took ten to one about an outsider, "Don Sebastian,"—a name I shall remember when all other historical knowledge has departed from me,—not because he knew anything of the horse, but because the longest odds were laid against him.

I didn't like the look of the "gentleman sportsman" who took custody of that five-pound note, but Richard (who had never seen him before) assured me, with his usual confidence, that he was "straight as a die" and "as honest as the day."

The race excited me exceedingly; Richard had lent me a field-glass (for everything he had was in duplicate, if not triplicate), and I watched the progress of that running rainbow with a beating heart. At first Yellow Cap (the Don) seemed completely out of it, the last of all; but presently he began to creep up, and as they drew near the winning-post, shouts of "Yellow Cap wins!" "Yellow Cap wins!" rent the air. He did win by a head, and with a well-pleased flush on my face at my friend's marvellous good fortune, I turned to congratulate him. He was gone. The tumult and confusion were excessive; but looking toward the exit gate, I just caught a glimpse of the book-maker passing rapidly through it, and then of Richard in pursuit of him.

A stout young farmer, whom I knew, was standing behind me, and in a few hurried words I told him what had happened. "Come with me," he said, and off we ran, as though we had been entered for the cup ourselves. The other two were already a field ahead, and far away from the course; but, fast as the book-maker ran, the delicate Richard had come up with him. I could imagine how pumped he was, but the idea of having been swindled by this scoundrel, who was running off with his five-pound note, as well as the fifty pounds he owed him, had no doubt lent him wings. It could not, however, lend him strength, nor teach him the art of self-defence, and after a few moments, passed doubtless in polite request and blunt refusal, we saw the miscreant strike out from the shoulder and Richard go down.

The time thus lost, however, short-lived as was the combat, was fatal to the victor. There were few better runners in Dalton than my companion and myself, and we gained on the book-maker, who had probably trained on gin and bad tobacco, hand over hand. As we drew near him he turned round and inquired, with many expletives, made half inarticulate by want of breath, what we wanted with a gentleman engaged on his own private affairs.

"Well," I said,—for as I could trust my agricultural friend with the more practical measures that were likely to follow I thought it only fair that I should do the talking,—“we want first the five-pound note which that young gentleman, whom you have just knocked down, intrusted to your care, and then the fifty pounds you have lost to him.”

He called Heaven to witness that he had never made a bet in his life with any young gentleman, but that, having been molested, he believed by a footpad, as he was returning home to his family, he had been compelled to defend himself.

"I heard you make the bet and saw you take the money," I remarked, with confidence.

"That's good enough," said the farmer. "Now if you don't shell out that money this instant, I'll have you back in the ring in a brace of shakes and tell them what has happened. Last year they tore a welsher pretty nigh to pieces, and this year, if you don't 'part,' they'll do it quite."

The book-maker turned livid,—I never saw a man in such a funk in my life,—and produced a greasy pocket-book, out of which he took Richard's bank-note, and ten quite new ones; and I noticed there were more left, so that poverty was not his excuse for fraud.

"Let me look at 'em against the sun," said the farmer, "to see as the water-mark is all right."

This was a precaution I should never have thought of, and it gave me for the first time a sense of the great intelligence of my father's parishioner.

"Yes, they're all correct. And now you may go; but if ever you show your face again on Southick (Southwick) race-course it will be the worst for you."

He slunk away, and we returned to Richard, who was sitting on the ground, looking at his nose, which was bleeding and had attained vast dimensions.

"Did you get the money?" were his first words, which I thought very characteristic.

"Yes, there it is, squire—ten fivers and your own note."

"Very good; I should never have seen a shilling of it but for you and Charley, so we will just divide it into three shares."

The farmer said, "No," but eventually took his L16 13s. 4d., and quite right too. Of course I did not take Richard's money, but he afterward bought me a rifle with it, which I could not refuse. The farmer, as may be well imagined, could be trusted to say nothing of our adventure; but it was impossible to hide Richard's nose. He was far too honest a fellow to tell a lie about it, and the whole story came out. His father was dreadfully shocked at it, and Lady Jane in despair: the one about his gambling propensities, and the other about his nose; she thought, if the injury did not prove fatal, he would be disfigured for life.

He was well in a week, but the circumstances had the gravest consequences. It was decided that something must be done with the heir of the Luscombes to wean him from low company (this was not me, but grooms and racing people); but even this predilection was ascribed in part to his fragile constitution. A

fashionable physician came down from London to consider the case. He could not quite be brought to the point desired by Lady Jane, to lay Richard's love of gambling at the door of the delicacy of his lungs; but he was brought very near it. The young fellow, his "opinion" was, had been brought up too much like a hothouse flower; his tastes were what they were chiefly because he had no opportunities of forming better ones; with improved strength his moral nature would become more elevated. That he was truthful was a great source of satisfaction (this was with reference to his distinct refusal to give up gambling to please anybody) and a most wholesome physical sign. "My recommendation is that he should be temporarily removed from his present dull surroundings; there is not scope in them for his mind; he should be sent abroad for a month or two with his tutor. That will do him a world of good."

If it was not very good advice, it was probably quite as judicious as other "opinions" for which a hundred and fifty guineas have been cheerfully paid. It was at all events a great comfort to hear that there was nothing constitutionally wrong with "dearest Richard," and that he only wanted a tonic for mind and body. The doctor's verdict was accepted by both parents, but there was an insurmountable obstacle to its being carried into effect in Master Richard himself. My father could not leave his parish and his family, and with no other tutor could the young gentleman be induced to go.

Now it happened that the butler at the Court, John Maitland, who, as is often the case in such households, had the gravity and dignity of a bishop, was so fortunate as to be a favourite both with the old folks and the young one. He really was a superior person, and not only "honest as the day" in Richard's eyes (which, as we have seen, was not a guarantee of straightforwardness), but in those of every one else. He had been born in the village, had been page to Mr. Luscombe's father, and had lived more than fifty years at the Court. The relations between master and servant were feudal, mingled with the more modern attachment that comes of good service properly appreciated. He thought the Luscombes, if not the only old family in the world, the best, and worshipped—though in a dignified and ecclesiastical manner—the ground trodden on both by the squire and Master Richard. My own impression was that under pretence of giving way to the latter he played into the parental hands; but as this was certainly for my young friend's good, I never communicated my suspicions to him. Maitland, at all events, had more influence over him than any man except my father. Still it astonished us all not a little, notwithstanding the high opinion we entertained of him, when we heard that the butler was to be intrusted with the guardianship of Richard abroad. Such a thing could not have happened in any other family, but so it was arranged; and partly as valet, partly as confidential companion and treasurer Maitland started with his young master on his travels.

These were to last for not less than six months, and Italy, because of its warm climate, was the country to which they were bound. That it would do the young fellow good, both moral and physical, we all hoped; but my father had his doubts. He feared that Maitland's influence over his companion would wane when away from the Court; but it never entered into his mind that he would willingly permit any wrong doing, and still less that the man would himself succumb to any temptation that involved dishonesty.

They travelled by easy stages; though they used the railway, of course, they did so only for a few hours a day, and got out and remained at places of interest. Richard was very amenable, and indeed showed no desire for dissipation; his one weakness—that of having a "spree"—had no opportunity of being gratified; and Maitland wrote home the most gratifying letters, not only respecting the behaviour of his charge, but of the improvement in his health. As they drew nearer to Italy, Richard observed one day that he should spend a day or two at Monte Carlo. Maitland had never heard of the place or of its peculiar attractions; and "Master Richard" only told him that it was very picturesque. The horror of the faithful retainer may therefore be imagined when he found that it was a gambling resort.

He could not prevent his young master frequenting the tables, and though he kept the purse, with the exception of a few pounds, and would certainly have stood between him and ruin, he could not prevent his winning. Richard had the luck, and more, that proverbially attends young people—he had the luck of the devil; his few napoleons swelling to a great many on the very first day, and he was in the seventh heaven of happiness. The next day and the next he won largely, immensely; in vain Maitland threatened to write to his father, and even to leave him.

"All right," replied the reckless youth. "You may do as you like; even if the governor disinherits me I can make my fortune by stopping here. And as to leaving me, go by all means; I shall get on very well with a French valet."

It was dreadful.

Richard grew happier and happier every day, as the golden flood flowed in upon him, but also extremely hectic. He passed the whole day at the tables, and the want of air and exercise, and, still more, the intense excitement which possessed him, began to have the most serious effect. That prescription of "seeing the world," and "escaping from his dull surroundings," was having a very different result from what had been expected. "The paths of glory lead but to the grave"; the young Englishman and his luck were the talk of all Monte Carlo, and he enjoyed his notoriety very much; but, as the poor butler plaintively observed, what was the good of that when Master Richard was "killing himself"?

How the news was received at the Court I had no means of judging, for the squire kept a rigid silence, except that he had long conferences with my father; and Lady Jane kept her room. It was indeed a very sore subject. The squire wanted to start for Monte Carlo at once; but he was singularly insular, detested travel, and in truth was very unfit for such a "cutting-out expedition" as was contemplated. He waited, half out of his mind with anxiety, but in hopes of a better report; what he hoped for was that luck would turn, and Richard lose every shilling.

The very reverse of this, however, took place; Richard won more and more. He would come home to his hotel in the evening with a porter carrying his gains. His portmanteau was full of napoleons. It was characteristic of him that he never thought of banking it. One evening he came in with very bright eyes, but a most shrunken and cadaverous face.

"This has been my best day of all, Johnny," he said. "See, I have won two thousand pounds; and you shall have a hundred of it."

But Maitland refused to have anything to do with such ill-gotten gains, for which, too, his young master was sacrificing his health, and perhaps his life. Still—though this did not strike Richard till afterward—he could not help regarding the great heap of gold with considerable interest. Added to the lad's previous gains, the amount was now very large indeed—more than five thousand pounds.

"I should really think, Master Richard, as you had now won enough."

"Enough? Certainly not. I have not broken the bank yet. I mean to do that before I've done with it, Johnny."

"That will be after you've killed yourself," said honest John.

"Well, then I shall die *rich*," was the reckless rejoinder.

Richard, who was too exhausted for repose, tossed and tumbled on his bed for hours, and eventually dropped into a heavy slumber, and slept far into the next morning. He awoke feeling very unwell, but his chief anxiety was lest he should miss the opening of the tables; he was always the first to begin. He rang his bell violently for Maitland. There was no reply, and when he rang again, one of the hotel servants came up.

"Where is my man?" he inquired.

"Monsieur's man-servant took monsieur's luggage to the railway-station; he is gone by the early train to Turin."

"Gone to Turin with my luggage?"

"Yes, with the two portmanteaus—very heavy ones."

Richard got out of bed, and dragged his weary limbs into the dressing-room, an inner apartment, where the portmanteaus were kept for safety. They were both gone.

"What train did the scoundrel go by? Where is my watch? Why, the villain has taken that too! Send for the police! No; there is no time to be lost—send a telegram. Why, he has not even left me enough money to pay a telegram!"

All his small change was gone. Honest John had taken everything; he had not left his young master a single sixpence. At this revelation of the state of affairs, poor Richard, weakened as he was by his long excitement, threw himself on the bed and burst into tears. The attendant, to whom, as usual, he had been liberal, was affected by an emotion so strange in an Englishman.

"Monsieur must not fret; the thief will be caught and the money restored. It will be well, perhaps to tell the *maitre d'hotel*."

The master of the hotel appeared with a very grave face. He was desolated to hear of the misfortune that had befallen his young guest. Perhaps there was not quite so much taken as had been reported.

"I tell you it's all gone; more than five thousand pounds, and my watch and chain; I have not half a franc in my possession."

"That is unfortunate indeed," said the *maitre d'hotel*, looking graver than ever, "because there is my bill to settle."

"Oh, hang your bill!" cried Richard. "*That* will be all right. I must telegraph to my father at once."

"But how is monsieur to telegraph if he has no money?"

It was probably the first time in his life that the young fellow had ever understood how inconvenient a thing is poverty. What also amazed him beyond measure was the man's manner; yesterday, and all other days, it had been polite to obsequiousness; now it was dry almost to insolence. It seemed, indeed, to imply some doubt of the bona fides of his guest—that he might not, in short, be much better than honest John himself, of whom he was possibly the confederate; that the whole story was a trumped-up one to account for the inability to meet his bill. As to his having won largely at the tables, that might be true enough; but he also might have lost it all, and more with it; money changes hands at Monte Carlo very rapidly.

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